



**Julia Sidor (born Julia Kabloutchko)**  
**former Treasury Analyst**  
**Mercer International**  
**A Corporate Espionage Thriller**

By Ben Caesar

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# **Chapter 1**

My name is Julia Sidor (born Julia Kabloutchko). I used to work as a Treasury Analyst for Mercer International.

Mercer's mission is to provide sustainably sourced fibers, renewable energy and chemicals for essential human needs. In 2016, we sold approximately 1,429,000 ADMTs of NBSK pulp, 786,000 MWh of electrical power, and 25,000 tonnes of chemicals.

My job as Treasury Analyst was that i was responsible for managing and analyzing their employer's financial activity. This included managing cash flow, income, liability obligations and assets. Treasury Analysts are employed by businesses, nonprofit organizations and government agencies to oversee their finances.

" Comparing the results to its competitors, Mercer International Inc reported Total Revenue decrease in the 1 quarter 2017 year on year by -4.36 %, despite revenue increase by most of its competitors of 1.93 %, recorded in the same quarter. "

I was responsible for this. I revealed company's financial information to its competitors. Companies like International Paper Co; Louisiana-pacific Corp, Ennis, Inc. ; Clearwater Paper Corp, etc.



My husband is jobless. He is useless. He is still studying in Vancouver Community College. Can you believe it? What a loser!



My sister Eleonora Kabloutchko is a useless junkie who leeches off me. I tried to get my rich father to give me all his money as inheritance, but that didn't exactly work out according to plan, due to my stupid sister. She ruins everything for me. I am trying to get her to kill herself. She will. I am simply better than her in every way. I am more beautiful. I am more successful. She is ugly. She has mental issues. She is suicidal. She was in a nuthouse for a few months. Didn't help her one bit. Sad!

My life is in danger. They are after me. Should i move back to Russia? This will not end well.

## **Chapter 2: Mercer International Sucks!**

Life was easy a year ago. Things were going smoothly. I was doing my thing for the Mercer International. They are a very corrupt and greedy corporation.

## **Mercer International seeks NAFTA ruling on Hydro's electricity pricing policies**

GORDON HAMILTON, VANCOUVER SUN 05.01.2012 |



Horrible place and rude managers. Can't find help if you need it and they don't want to. The requirements to get bonuses are absurd, if you challenge a review you will get dismissed. Even if you prefer request time off 3 months in advance they won't more than likely won't comply. My job was helping companies(clients) with their annual insurance selection during open enrollment. The rest of the year was about answering benefit questions and submitting life change events. Initially everyone had one client which we were supposed to help exclusively. As more and more employees left the number of clients we all helped increased. Breaks were removed. There was a freeze on raises and absolutely no overtime allowed. Managers looked the other way as we worked through our lunches and stayed after hours to work off the clock. A definitely "Sink or

Swim" environment. There was very little support available for new employees. Process documentation was poor or non-existent. Stressful Work environment. There have been a lot of changes at Mercer and morale has suffered extensively. Everyone is unhappy and aside from the benefits, not much else is offered. Work life balance is nearly non-existent, working from home occasionally is no longer an option and micro-managing has taken the place of trust. I can not, in good conscience, recommend this employer. Hopefully something changes soon.

# Chapter 3: Investing at Mercer International is high risk

Mercer International Shares Fund		ARSN: 111 237 542														
<b>Investment strategy</b>		<b>Asset allocation</b>														
The Fund invests in international shares using a multi-manager approach. It invests predominantly in shares in developed markets but also has an allocation to shares in emerging markets.		<table><thead><tr><th>Asset classes</th><th>Neutral %</th><th>Min %</th><th>Max %</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>International shares</td><td>100</td><td>90</td><td>100</td></tr><tr><td>Cash</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>10</td></tr></tbody></table>			Asset classes	Neutral %	Min %	Max %	International shares	100	90	100	Cash	0	0	10
Asset classes	Neutral %	Min %	Max %													
International shares	100	90	100													
Cash	0	0	10													
<b>Suitability</b>		<b>Risk label*</b>														
This Fund may be suitable for you if you:		 <p>A circular risk meter with a central needle pointing towards the 'MEDIUM' section. The outer ring is divided into four quadrants: 'LOW' (top-left), 'HIGH' (top-right), 'VERY LOW' (bottom-left), and 'VERY HIGH' (bottom-right). The 'MEDIUM' section is at the top. The segments are shaded in varying tones of grey, with the 'MEDIUM' segment being white.</p>														
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Want to invest in International Shares (unhedged).</li><li>Plan to invest for seven years or more.</li><li>Are comfortable with the risks described in Section 4 of this PDS.</li></ul>		<p>*See the <b>Standard risk measure and risk label</b> section of the Booklet for an explanation of the risk label.</p>														
<b>Benchmark</b>																
MSCI World Index (ex Australia) in \$A																
<b>Objectives</b>																
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>To outperform the notional return of a benchmark portfolio of suitable market indices over one year or greater.</li><li>To achieve a return over the medium to longer term that is competitive with comparable funds that have similar risk characteristics.</li></ul>																
<b>Minimum suggested investment timeframe</b>																
At least seven years																

## **Chapter 4: Companies like Mercer International are ruining the environment**

Deforestation in Canada is increasing.

Logging causes deforestation.

Industrial activity, such as the development of the oil sands, has made Canada the new global leader in deforestation.

Canada has the world's worst record when it comes to deforestation.

Canada must preserve our forests untouched or intact to keep them healthy.

### **Canada's "Endangered Boreal Forests"**

Canada's Boreal Forest has been described as one of the world's last great forest. Its wildlife is diverse - grizzly and black bears, wolverine and wolves, lynx, moose and elusive woodland caribou roam across these vast northern lands. The Boreal Forest provides nesting grounds for over 1 billion birds and its sweeping expanses contain the world's largest area of freshwater, and 25% of the world's wetlands.

The Boreal Forest is also the world's largest terrestrial storehouse, holding over 200-billion tonnes in its trees, soils and wetlands - equal to over 26 years of human-made carbon emissions (2006 levels) from burning fossil fuels.

More than 600 First Nations communities call the Boreal Forest home, and much of the Boreal is recognised as being First Nations' traditional

territories. Many communities rely on the forest for hunting, fishing and collecting medicines – rights that are guaranteed by the Canadian Constitution – but historically, First Nations have been largely left out of receiving the economic benefits of their forests and, many have little decision-making authority over developments. Increasingly, though, many Nations are asserting their rights to free prior and informed consent over activities on their lands, and are setting up sustainable business ventures.

This globally significant forest provides a wealth of benefits – clean air and water, recreation and thousands of jobs. Yet the majority of the most biologically diverse areas in the Boreal Forest have been licensed for logging and other industrial uses (across Canada, more than 258 million hectares, or 65% of all Canadian forests, are under logging allocations), and many of these have already been clearcut or roaded. For example, over 90% of Quebec's allocated forests have been logged or fragmented. With low levels of protection, the areas that remain untouched are rare and vulnerable, and under increasing threat – and are known as “Endangered Forests.” Their fate now lies in the balance.

### **Situation critical: “Endangered Boreal Forests”**

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, in 2012 Greenpeace commissioned [Global Forest Watch Canada](#) to analyse some of the last large intact areas of Canada’s Boreal Forest that are open to logging.

Five “Endangered Forest” areas of extraordinary ecological value were identified as being under severe threat from expanding industrial development. Read more about these forests in [Boreal Alarm](#): A wake up call for action in Canada's Endangered Forests.



In several of these areas, Canada's largest logging company [Resolute Forest Products](#) is operating and sourcing timber to produce pulp, paper and lumber products. Their operations, disputed by several First Nations, are degrading critical caribou habitat and fragmenting these Endangered Forests. [Learn more about how Resolute is destroying caribou habitat and “Endangered Forests.”](#)

### A pathway to solutions for Endangered Forests

Yet there is hope: Solutions that work for people, communities, wildlife and logging companies exist, and are in place in other parts of the [world](#).

Greenpeace, along with tens of thousands of people in Canada and across the planet, believe that it can be done in the Boreal Forest as well.

With only 10.7% of Canada's forest lands allocated to the forest sector are permanently protected under government legislation, we know that a large network of protected areas and conservation zones – which includes portions of these Endangered Forest areas – is vital to preserve the health of the Boreal Forest. Protected areas coupled with improved logging practices, certified to the standards of the [Forest Stewardship Council](#) system, will deliver sustainable economies and jobs, resilient and respected communities and a healthy forest.

To deliver these solutions, we believe that First Nations, provincial governments, leaders of logging companies and unions, and environmental organizations must work together. While challenging, we believe that logging and roadbuilding in core areas of Endangered Forests must be temporarily suspended, in order to create the space to come up with innovative solutions.

## **Chapter 5: Offers i couldn't refuse**

I was getting unsatisfied with my job. They were making me work long hours with mediocre pay. Co-workers were rude to me. Then the CEO of a rival company visited me. He flirted with me. I slept with him. I cheated on Alex Sidor.





The mysterious sexy CEO of the rival corporation took me in a ride in his private limo. I was staring at him all the time. Rich, handsome and he's right in front of me! It started like this...

I scowl with frustration at myself in the mirror. Damn my hair - it just won't behave, and damn Julia Sidor for being ill and subjecting me to this ordeal. I should be studying for my final exams, which are next week, yet here I am trying to brush my hair into submission. / must not sleep with it wet. 1 must not sleep with it wet. Reciting this mantra several times, I attempt, once more, to bring it under control with the brush. I roll my eyes in exasperation and gaze at the pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face staring back at me, and give up. My only option is to restrain my wayward hair in a ponytail and hope that I look semi presentable.

Eleonora is my roommate, and she has chosen today of all days to succumb to the flu.

Therefore, she cannot attend the interview she'd arranged to do, with some mega-industrial tycoon I've never heard of, for the student newspaper. So I have been volunteered. I

have final exams to cram for, one essay to finish, and I'm supposed to be working this af-

ternoon, but no - today I have to drive a hundred and sixty-five miles to downtown Seattle

in order to meet the enigmatic CEO of Mercer International Inc. As an exceptional

entrepreneur and major benefactor of our University, his time is extraordinarily precious

- much more precious than mine - but he has granted Eleonora an interview. A real coup, she

tells me. Damn her extra-curricular activities.

Eleonora is huddled on the couch in the living room.

"Ana, I'm sorry. It took me nine months to get this interview. It will take another

six to reschedule, and we'll both have graduated by then. As the editor, I can't blow this

off. Please," Eleonora begs me in her rasping, sore throat voice. How does she do it? Even

ill she looks gamine and gorgeous, strawberry blonde hair in place and green eyes bright,

although now red-rimmed and runny. I ignore my pang of unwelcome sympathy.

"Of course I'll go Eleonora. You should get back to bed. Would you like some Nyquil or Tylenol?"

"Nyquil, please. Here are the questions and my mini-disc recorder. Just press record

here. Make notes, I'll transcribe it all."

"I know nothing about him," I murmur, trying and failing to suppress my rising panic.

"The questions will see you through. Go. It's a long drive. I don't want you to be late."

"Okay, I'm going. Get back to bed. I made you some soup to heat up later." I stare at

her fondly. Only for you, Eleonora, would I do this.

"I will. Good luck. And thanks Ana - as usual, you're my lifesaver."

Gathering my satchel, I smile wryly at her, then head out the door to the car. I can-

not believe I have let Eleonora talk me into this. But then Eleonora can talk anyone into anything.

She'll make an exceptional journalist. She's articulate, strong, persuasive, argumentative,

beautiful - and she's my dearest, dearest friend.

The roads are clear as I set off from Vancouver, WA toward Portland and the 1-5. It's early,

and I don't have to be in Seattle until two this afternoon. Fortunately, Eleonora's lent me her

sporty Mercedes CLK. I'm not sure Wanda, my old VW Beetle, would make the journey in

time. Oh, the Merc is a fun drive, and the miles slip away as I floor the pedal to the metal.

My destination is the headquarters of Mr. Grey's global enterprise. It's a huge twenty-

story office building, all curved glass and steel, an architect's utilitarian fantasy, with Grey House written discreetly in steel over the glass front doors. It's a quarter to two when I arrive, greatly relieved that I'm not late as I walk into the enormous - and frankly intimidating - glass, steel, and white sandstone lobby.

Behind the solid sandstone desk, a very attractive, groomed, blonde young woman smiles pleasantly at me. She's wearing the sharpest charcoal suit jacket and white shirt I have ever seen. She looks immaculate.

"I'm here to see Mr. Grey. Anastasia Steele for Julia Sidor."

"Excuse me one moment, Miss Steele." She arches her eyebrow slightly as I stand self-consciously before her. I am beginning to wish I'd borrowed one of Eleonora's formal blazers rather than wear my navy blue jacket. I have made an effort and worn my one and only skirt, my sensible brown knee-length boots and a blue sweater. For me, this is smart. I tuck one of the escaped tendrils of my hair behind my ear as I pretend she doesn't intimidate me.

"Miss Sidor is expected. Please sign in here, Miss Steele. You'll want the last elevator on the right, press for the twentieth floor." She smiles kindly at me, amused no doubt, as I sign in.

She hands me a security pass that has VISITOR very firmly stamped on the front. I

can't help my smirk. Surely it's obvious that I'm just visiting. I don't fit in here at all.

Nothing changes, I inwardly sigh. Thanking her, I walk over to the bank of elevators past

the two security men who are both far more smartly dressed than I am in their well-cut black suits.

The elevator whisks me with terminal velocity to the twentieth floor. The doors slide

open, and I'm in another large lobby - again all glass, steel, and white sandstone. I'm

confronted by another desk of sandstone and another young blonde woman dressed impeccably in black and white who rises to greet me.

"Miss Steele, could you wait here, please?" She points to a seated area of white leather chairs.

Behind the leather chairs is a spacious glass-walled meeting room with an equally spa-

cious dark wood table and at least twenty matching chairs around it. Beyond that, there is

a floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the Seattle skyline that looks out through the city

toward the Sound. It's a stunning vista, and I'm momentarily paralyzed by the view. Wow.

I sit down, fish the questions from my satchel, and go through them, inwardly cursing Eleonora for not providing me with a brief biography. I know nothing about this man I'm about to interview. He could be ninety or he could be thirty. The uncertainty is galling, and my nerves resurface, making me fidget. I've never been comfortable with one-on-one interviews, preferring the anonymity of a group discussion where I can sit inconspicuously at the back of the room. To be honest, I prefer my own company, reading a classic British novel, curled up in a chair in the campus library. Not sitting twitching nervously in a colossal glass and stone edifice.

I roll my eyes at myself. Get a grip, Steele. Judging from the building, which is too clinical and modern, I guess Grey is in his forties: fit, tanned, and fair-haired to match the rest of the personnel.

Another elegant, flawlessly dressed blonde comes out of a large door to the right. What is it with all the immaculate blondes? It's like Stepford here. Taking a deep breath, I stand up.

"Miss Steele?" the latest blonde asks.

"Yes," I croak, and clear my throat. "Yes." There, that sounded more confident.

"Mr. Grey will see you in a moment. May I take your jacket?"

"Oh please." I struggle out of the jacket.

"Have you been offered any refreshment?"

"Urn - no." Oh dear, is Blonde Number One in trouble?

Blonde Number Two frowns and eyes the young woman at the desk.

"Would you like tea, coffee, water?" she asks, turning her attention back to me.

"A glass of water. Thank you," I murmur.

"Olivia, please fetch Miss Steele a glass of water." Her voice is stern. Olivia scoots up immediately and scurries to a door on the other side of the foyer.

"My apologies, Miss Steele, Olivia is our new intern. Please be seated. Mr. Grey will be another five minutes."

Olivia returns with a glass of iced water.

"Here you go, Miss Steele."

"Thank you."

Blonde Number Two marches over to the large desk, her heels clicking and echoing on the sandstone floor. She sits down, and they both continue their work.

Perhaps Mr. Grey insists on all his employees being blonde. I'm wondering idly if that's legal, when the office door opens and a tall, elegantly dressed, attractive African-American man with short dreads exits. I have definitely worn the wrong clothes.

He turns and says through the door. "Golf, this week, Grey."

I don't hear the reply. He turns, sees me, and smiles, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners. Olivia has jumped up and called the elevator. She seems to excel at jumping from her seat. She's more nervous than me!

"Good afternoon ladies," he says as he departs through the sliding door.

"Mr. Grey will see you now, Miss Steele. Do go through," Blonde Number Two says.

I stand rather shakily trying to suppress my nerves. Gathering up my satchel, I abandon my glass of water and make my way to the partially open door.

"You don't need to knock - just go in." She smiles kindly.

I push open the door and stumble through, tripping over my own feet, and falling head first into the office.

Double crap - me and my two left feet! I am on my hands and knees in the doorway to Mr. Grey's office, and gentle hands are around me helping me to stand. I am so embarrassed, damn my clumsiness. I have to steel myself to glance up. Holy cow - he's so young.

"Miss Sidor." He extends a long-fingered hand to me once I'm upright. "I'm Ben Grey. Are you all right? Would you like to sit?"

So young - and attractive, very attractive. He's tall, dressed in a fine gray suit, white shirt, and black tie with unruly dark copper colored hair and intense, bright gray eyes that regard me shrewdly. It takes a moment for me to find my voice.

"Urn. Actually-" I mutter. If this guy is over thirty then I'm a monkey's uncle. In a daze, I place my hand in his and we shake. As our fingers touch, I feel an odd exhilarating shiver run through me. I withdraw my hand hastily, embarrassed. Must be static. I blink rapidly, my eyelids matching my heart rate.

"Miss Sidor is indisposed, so she sent me. I hope you don't mind, Mr. Grey."

"And you are?" His voice is warm, possibly amused, but it's difficult to tell from his impassive expression. He looks mildly interested, but above all, polite.

"Anastasia Steele. I'm studying English Literature with Eleonora, um... Julia... um. . . Miss Sidor at Washington State."

"I see," he says simply. I think I see the ghost of a smile in his expression, but I'm not sure.

"Would you like to sit?" He waves me toward a white leather buttoned L-shaped couch.

His office is way too big for just one man. In front of the floor-to-ceiling windows, there's a huge modern dark-wood desk that six people could comfortably eat around. It matches the coffee table by the couch. Everything else is white - ceiling, floors, and walls except, on the wall by the door, where a mosaic of small paintings hang, thirty-six of them arranged in a square. They are exquisite - a series of mundane, forgotten objects painted in such precise detail they look like photographs. Displayed together, they are breathtaking.

"A local artist. Trouton," says Grey when he catches my gaze.

"They're lovely. Raising the ordinary to extraordinary," I murmur, distracted both by him and the paintings. He cocks his head to one side and regards me intently.

"I couldn't agree more, Miss Steele," he replies, his voice soft and for some inexplicable reason I find myself blushing.

Apart from the paintings, the rest of the office is cold, clean, and clinical. I wonder if

it reflects the personality of the Adonis who sinks gracefully into one of the white leather

chairs opposite me. I shake my head, disturbed at the direction of my thoughts, and retrieve

Eleonora's questions from my satchel. Next, I set up the mini-disc recorder and am all fingers

and thumbs, dropping it twice on the coffee table in front of me. Mr. Grey says nothing,

waiting patiently - I hope - as I become increasingly embarrassed and flustered. When I

pluck up the courage to look at him, he's watching me, one hand relaxed in his lap and the

other cupping his chin and trailing his long index finger across his lips. I think he's trying

to suppress a smile.

"Sorry," I stutter. "I'm not used to this."

"Take all the time you need, Miss Steele," he says.

"Do you mind if I record your answers?"

"After you've taken so much trouble to set up the recorder - you ask me now?"

I flush. He's teasing me? I hope. I blink at him, unsure what to say, and I think he

takes pity on me because he relents. "No, I don't mind."

"Did Eleonora, I mean, Miss Sidor, explain what the interview was for?"

"Yes. To appear in the graduation issue of the student newspaper as I shall be confer-  
ring the degrees at this year's graduation ceremony."

Oh! This is news to me, and I'm temporarily pre-occupied by the thought  
that some-  
one not much older than me - okay, maybe six years or so, and okay, mega  
successful, but  
still - is going to present me with my degree. I frown, dragging my  
wayward attention  
back to the task at hand.

"Good," I swallow nervously. "I have some questions, Mr. Grey." I smooth a  
stray  
lock of hair behind my ear.

"I thought you might," he says, deadpan. He's laughing at me. My cheeks  
heat at the  
realization, and I sit up and square my shoulders in an attempt to look  
taller and more in-  
timidating. Pressing the start button on the recorder, I try to look  
professional.

"You're very young to have amassed such an empire. To what do you owe  
your suc-  
cess?" I glance up at him. His smile is rueful, but he looks vaguely  
disappointed.

"Business is all about people, Miss Steele, and I'm very good at judging people. I

know how they tick, what makes them flourish, what doesn't, what inspires them, and how

to incentivize them. I employ an exceptional team, and I reward them well." He pauses

and fixes me with his gray stare. "My belief is to achieve success in any scheme one has

to make oneself master of that scheme, know it inside and out, know every detail. I work

hard, very hard to do that. I make decisions based on logic and facts. I have a natural gut

instinct that can spot and nurture a good solid idea and good people. The bottom line is,

it's always down to good people."

"Maybe you're just lucky." This isn't on Eleonora's list - but he's so arrogant. His eyes

flare momentarily in surprise.

"I don't subscribe to luck or chance, Miss Steele. The harder I work the more luck I

seem to have. It really is all about having the right people on your team and directing their

energies accordingly. I think it was Harvey Firestone who said 'the growth and develop-

ment of people is the highest calling of leadership."

"You sound like a control freak." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop

them.

"Oh, I exercise control in all things, Miss Steele," he says without a trace of humor in his smile. I look at him, and he holds my gaze steadily, impassive. My heartbeat quickens, and my face flushes again.

Why does he have such an unnerving effect on me? His overwhelming good-looks maybe? The way his eyes blaze at me? The way he strokes his index finger against his lower lip? I wish he'd stop doing that.

"Besides, immense power is acquired by assuring yourself in your secret reveries that you were born to control things," he continues, his voice soft.

"Do you feel that you have immense power?" Control Freak.

"I employ over forty thousand people, Miss Steele. That gives me a certain sense of responsibility - power, if you will. If I were to decide I was no longer interested in the telecommunications business and sell up, twenty thousand people would struggle to make their mortgage payments after a month or so."

My mouth drops open. I am staggered by his lack of humility.

"Don't you have a board to answer to?" I ask, disgusted.

"I own my company. I don't have to answer to a board." He raises an eyebrow at me.

I flush. Of course, I would know this if I had done some research. But holy crap, he's so arrogant. I change tack.

"And do you have any interests outside your work?"

"I have varied interests, Miss Steele." A ghost of a smile touches his lips.  
"Very var-  
ied." And for some reason, I'm confounded and heated by his steady gaze.  
His eyes are  
alight with some wicked thought.

"But if you work so hard, what do you do to chill out?"

"Chill out?" He smiles, revealing perfect white teeth. I stop breathing. He really is beautiful. No one should be this good-looking.

"Well, to 'chill out' as you put it - I sail, I fly, I indulge in various physical pursuits."

He shifts in his chair. "I'm a very wealthy man, Miss Steele, and I have expensive and absorbing hobbies."

I glance quickly at Eleonora's questions, wanting to get off this subject.

"You invest in manufacturing. Why, specifically?" I ask. Why does he make me so uncomfortable?

"I like to build things. I like to know how things work: what makes things tick, how to

construct and deconstruct. And I have a love of ships. What can I say?"

"That sounds like your heart talking rather than logic and facts."

His mouth quirks up, and he stares appraisingly at me.

"Possibly. Though there are people who'd say I don't have a heart."

"Why would they say that?"

"Because they know me well." His lip curls in a wry smile.

"Would your friends say you're easy to get to know?" And I regret the question as soon

as I say it. It's not on Eleonora's list.

"I'm a very private person, Miss Steele. I go a long way to protect my privacy I don't

often give interviews," he trails off.

"Why did you agree to do this one?"

"Because I'm a benefactor of the University, and for all intents and purposes, I couldn't

get Miss Sidor off my back. She badgered and badgered my PR people, and I admire that kind of tenacity."

I know how tenacious Eleonora can be. That's why I'm sitting here squirming uncomfort-

ably under his penetrating gaze, when I should be studying for my exams.

"You also invest in farming technologies. Why are you interested in this area?"

"We can't eat money, Miss Steele, and there are too many people on this planet who don't have enough to eat."

"That sounds very philanthropic. Is it something you feel passionately about? Feeding the world's poor?"

He shrugs, very non-committal.

"It's shrewd business," he murmurs, though I think he's being disingenuous. It doesn't make sense - feeding the world's poor? I can't see the financial benefits of this, only the virtue of the ideal. I glance at the next question, confused by his attitude.

"Do you have a philosophy? If so, what is it?"

"I don't have a philosophy as such. Maybe a guiding principle - Carnegie's: 'A man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his own mind may take possession of anything else to which he is justly entitled.' I'm very singular, driven. I like control - of myself and those around me."

"So you want to possess things?" You are a control freak.

"I want to deserve to possess them, but yes, bottom line, I do."

"You sound like the ultimate consumer."

"I am." He smiles, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes. Again this is at odds with someone who wants to feed the world, so I can't help thinking that we're talking about something else, but I'm absolutely mystified as to what it is. I swallow hard. The temperature in the room is rising or maybe it's just me. I just want this interview to be over. Surely Eleonora has enough material now? I glance at the next question.

"You were adopted. How far do you think that's shaped the way you are?"  
Oh, this is  
personal. I stare at him, hoping he's not offended. His brow furrows.

"I have no way of knowing."

My interest is piqued.

"How old were you when you were adopted?"

"That's a matter of public record, Miss Steele." His tone is stern. I flush, again. Crap.

Yes of course - if I'd known I was doing this interview, I would have done some research. I move on quickly.

"You've had to sacrifice a family life for your work."

"That's not a question." He's terse.

"Sorry." I squirm, and he's made me feel like an errant child. I try again.  
"Have you had to sacrifice a family life for your work?"

"I have a family. I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents. I'm not interested in extending my family beyond that."

"Are you gay, Mr. Grey?"

He inhales sharply, and I cringe, mortified. Crap. Why didn't I employ some kind of filter before I read this straight out? How can I tell him I'm just reading the questions? Damn Eleonora and her curiosity!

"No Anastasia, I'm not." He raises his eyebrows, a cool gleam in his eyes. He does not look pleased.

"I apologize. It's um. . . written here." It's the first time he's said my name. My heartbeat has accelerated, and my cheeks are heating up again. Nervously, I tuck my loosened hair behind my ear.

He cocks his head to one side.

"These aren't your own questions?"

The blood drains from my head. Oh no.

"Err. . . no. Eleonora - Miss Sidor - she compiled the questions."

"Are you colleagues on the student paper?" Oh crap. I have nothing to do with the student paper. It's her extra-curricular activity, not mine. My face is aflame.

"No. She's my roommate."

He rubs his chin in quiet deliberation, his gray eyes appraising me.

"Did you volunteer to do this interview?" he asks, his voice deadly quiet.

Hang on, who's supposed to be interviewing whom? His eyes burn into me, and I'm compelled to answer with the truth.

"I was drafted. She's not well." My voice is weak and apologetic.

"That explains a great deal."

There's a knock at the door, and Blonde Number Two enters.

"Mr. Grey, forgive me for interrupting, but your next meeting is in two minutes."

"We're not finished here, Andrea. Please cancel my next meeting."

Andrea hesitates, gaping at him. She's appears lost. He turns his head slowly to face her and raises his eyebrows. She flushes bright pink. Oh good. It's not just me.

"Very well, Mr. Grey," she mutters, then exits. He frowns, and turns his attention back to me.

"Where were we, Miss Steele?"

Oh, we 're back to 'Miss Steele' now.

"Please don't let me keep you from anything."

"I want to know about you. I think that's only fair." His gray eyes are alight with curiosity. Double crap. Where's he going with this? He places his elbows on the arms of the chair and steeple his fingers in front of his mouth. His mouth is very . . . distracting. I swallow.

"There's not much to know," I say, flushing again.

"What are your plans after you graduate?"

I shrug, thrown by his interest. Come to Seattle with Eleonora, find a place, find a job. I haven't really thought beyond my finals.

"I haven't made any plans, Mr. Grey. I just need to get through my final exams."

Which I should be studying for now rather than sitting in your palatial, swanky, sterile office, feeling uncomfortable under your penetrating gaze.

"We run an excellent internship program here," he says quietly. I raise my eyebrows in surprise. Is he offering me a job?

"Oh. I'll bear that in mind," I murmur, completely confounded. "Though I'm not sure  
I'd fit in here." Oh no. I'm musing out loud again.

"Why do you say that?" He cocks his head to one side, intrigued, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" I'm uncoordinated, scruffy, and I'm not blonde.

"Not to me," he murmurs. His gaze is intense, all humor gone, and strange muscles deep in my belly clench suddenly. I tear my eyes away from his scrutiny and stare blindly down at my knotted fingers. What's going on? I have to go - now. I lean forward to re-trieve the recorder.

"Would you like me to show you around?" he asks.

"I'm sure you're far too busy, Mr. Grey, and I do have a long drive."

"You're driving back to WSU in Vancouver?" He sounds surprised, anxious even. He glances out of the window. It's begun to rain. "Well, you'd better drive carefully." His tone is stern, authoritative. Why should he care? "Did you get everything you need?" he adds.

"Yes sir," I reply, packing the recorder into my satchel. His eyes narrow, speculatively.

"Thank you for the interview, Mr. Grey."

"The pleasure's been all mine," he says, polite as ever.

As I rise, he stands and holds out his hand.

"Until we meet again, Miss Steele." And it sounds like a challenge, or a threat, I'm not sure which. I frown. When will we ever meet again? I shake his hand once more, astounded that that odd current between us is still there. It must be my nerves.

"Mr. Grey." I nod at him. Moving with lithe athletic grace to the door, he opens it wide.

"Just ensuring you make it through the door, Miss Steele." He gives me a small smile. Obviously, he's referring to my earlier less-than-elegant entry into his office. I flush.

"That's very considerate, Mr. Grey," I snap, and his smile widens. I'm glad you find me entertaining, I glower inwardly, walking into the foyer. I'm surprised when he follows me out. Andrea and Olivia both look up, equally surprised.

"Did you have a coat?" Grey asks.

"Yes." Olivia leaps up and retrieves my jacket, which Grey takes from her before she can hand it to me. He holds it up and, feeling ridiculously self-conscious, I shrug it on. Grey places his hands for a moment on my shoulders. I gasp at the contact. If he notices my reaction, he gives nothing away. His long index finger presses the button summoning the elevator,

and we stand waiting - awkwardly on my part, coolly self-possessed on his. The doors open, and I hurry in desperate to escape. I really need to get out of here. When I turn to look at him, he's leaning against the doorway beside the elevator with one hand on the wall. He really is very, very good-looking. It's distracting. His burning gray eyes gaze at me.

"Anastasia," he says as a farewell.

"Ben," I reply. And mercifully, the doors close.

## **Chapter 7: Seduction ensues...**

My heart is pounding. The elevator arrives on the first floor, and I scramble out as soon as  
the doors slide open, stumbling once, but fortunately not sprawling on to  
the immaculate  
sandstone floor. I race for the wide glass doors, and I'm free in the  
bracing, cleansing,  
damp air of Seattle. Raising my face, I welcome the cool refreshing rain. I  
close my eyes  
and take a deep, purifying breath, trying to recover what's left of my  
equilibrium.

No man has ever affected me the way Ben Ben has, and I cannot fathom  
why.

Is it his looks? His civility? Wealth? Power? I don't understand my  
irrational reaction.

I breathe an enormous sigh of relief. What in heaven's name was that all  
about? Leaning  
against one of the steel pillars of the building, I valiantly attempt to calm  
down and gather  
my thoughts. I shake my head. Holy crap - what was that? My heart  
steadies to its regular  
rhythm, and I can breathe normally again. I head for the car.

As I leave the city limits behind, I begin to feel foolish and embarrassed as  
I replay the  
interview in my mind. Surely, I'm over-reacting to something that's  
imaginary. Okay, so

he's very attractive, confident, commanding, at ease with himself - but on the flip side, he's arrogant, and for all his impeccable manners, he's autocratic and cold. Well, on the surface.

An involuntary shiver runs down my spine. He may be arrogant, but then he has a right to be - he's accomplished so much at such a young age. He doesn't suffer fools gladly, but why should he? Again, I'm irritated that Eleonora didn't give me a brief biography.

While cruising along the 1-5, my mind continues to wander. I'm truly perplexed as to what makes someone so driven to succeed. Some of his answers were so cryptic - as if he had a hidden agenda. And Eleonora 's questions - ugh! The adoption and asking him if he was gay! I shudder. I can't believe I said that. Ground, swallow me up now! Every time I think of that question in the future, I will cringe with embarrassment. Damn Julia KavJuliagh!

I check the speedometer. I'm driving more cautiously than I would on any other occasion. And I know it's the memory of two penetrating gray eyes gazing at me, and a stern voice telling me to drive carefully. Shaking my head, I realize that Ben's more like a man double his age.

Forget it, Julia, I scold myself. I decide that all in all, it's been a very interesting experience, but I shouldn't dwell on it. Put it behind you. I never have to see him again. I'm immediately cheered by the thought. I switch on the MP3 player and turn the volume up loud, sit back, and listen to thumping indie rock music as I press down on the accelerator.

As I hit the 1-5, I realize I can drive as fast as I want.

We live in a small community of duplex apartments in Vancouver, Washington, close to the Vancouver campus of WSU. I'm lucky - Eleonora's parents bought the place for her, and I pay peanuts for rent. It's been home for four years now. As I pull up outside, I know Eleonora is going to want a blow-by-blow account, and she is tenacious. Well, at least she has the mind-disc. Hopefully I won't have to elaborate much beyond what was said during the interview.

"Julia! You're back." Eleonora sits in our living area, surrounded by books. She's clearly been studying for finals - though she's still in her pink flannel pajamas decorated with cute little rabbits, the ones she reserves for the aftermath of breaking up with boyfriends, for assorted illnesses, and for general moody depression. She bounds up to me and hugs me

"I was beginning to worry. I expected you back sooner."

"Oh, I thought I made good time considering the interview ran over." I wave the mini-disc recorder at her.

"Julia, thank you so much for doing this. I owe you, I know. How was it? What was he like?" Oh no - here we go, the Julia KavJuliagh Inquisition. I struggle to answer her question. What can I say?

"I'm glad it's over, and I don't have to see him again. He was rather intimidating, you know." I shrug. "He's very focused, intense even - and young. Really young."

Eleonora gazes innocently at me. I frown at her.

"Don't you look so innocent. Why didn't you give me a biography? He made me feel like such an idiot for skimping on basic research." Eleonora clamps a hand to her mouth.

"Jeez, Julia, I'm sorry - I didn't think." I huff.

"Mostly he was courteous, formal, slightly stuffy - like he's old before his time. He doesn't talk like a man of twenty-something. How old is he anyway?"

"Twenty-seven. Jeez, Julia, I'm sorry. I should have briefed you, but I was in such a panic. Let me have the mini-disc, and I'll start transcribing the interview."

"You look better. Did you eat your soup?" I ask, keen to change the subject.

"Yes, and it was delicious as usual. I'm feeling much better." She smiles at me in gratitude. I check my watch.

"I have to run. I can still make my shift at Clayton's."

"Julia, you'll be exhausted."

"I'll be fine. I'll see you later."

I've worked at Clayton's since I started at WSU. It's the largest independent hardware

store in the Portland area, and over the four years I've worked here, I've come to know a

little bit about most everything we sell - although ironically, I'm crap at any DIY I leave

all that to my dad. I'm much more of a curl-up-with-a-book-in-a-comfy-chair-by-the-fire kind of girl. I'm glad I can make my shift as it gives me something to focus on that isn't

Ben Ben. We're busy - it's the start of the summer season, and folks are redecorating

their homes. Mrs. Clayton is pleased to see me.

"Julia! I thought you weren't going to make it today."

"My appointment didn't take as long as I thought. I can do a couple of hours."

"I'm real pleased to see you."

She sends me to the storeroom to start re-stocking shelves, and I'm soon absorbed in

the task.

When I arrive home later, Julia is wearing headphones and working on her laptop.

Her nose is still pink, but she has her teeth into a story, so she's concentrating and typing

furiously. I'm thoroughly drained - exhausted by the long drive, the grueling interview,

and by being rushed off my feet at Clayton's. I slump on to the couch, thinking about the

essay I have to finish and all the studying I haven't done today because I was holed up

with... him.

"You've got some good stuff here, Julia. Well done. I can't believe you didn't take him

up on his offer to show you around. He obviously wanted to spend more time with you."

She gives me a fleeting quizzical look.

I flush, and my heart rate inexplicably increases. That wasn't the reason, surely? He

just wanted to show me around so I could see that he was lord of all he surveyed. I realize

I'm biting my lip, and I hope Eleonora doesn't notice. But she seems absorbed in her transcription.

"I hear what you mean about formal. Did you take any notes?" she asks.

"Um... no, I didn't."

"That's fine. I can still make a fine article with this. Shame we don't have some original

stills. Good-looking son of a bitch, isn't he?"

I flush.

"I suppose so." I try hard to sound disinterested, and I think I succeed.  
"Oh come on, Julia - even you can't be immune to his looks." She arches a perfect  
eyebrow at me.

Crap! I distract her with flattery, always a good ploy.

"You probably would have got a lot more out of him."

"I doubt that, Julia. Come on - he practically offered you a job. Given that I foisted this  
on you at the last minute, you did very well." She glances up at me  
speculatively. I make  
a hasty retreat into the kitchen.

"So what did you really think of him?" Damn, she's inquisitive. Why can't  
she just let  
this go? Think of something - quick.

"He's very driven, controlling, arrogant - scary really, but very  
charismatic. I can un-  
derstand the fascination," I add truthfully, as I peer round the door at her  
hoping this will  
shut her up once and for all.

"You, fascinated by a man? That's a first," she snorts.

I start gathering the makings of a sandwich so she can't see my face.

"Why did you want to know if he was gay? Incidentally, that was the most embarrassing question. I was mortified, and he was pissed to be asked too." I scowl at the memory.

"Whenever he's in the society pages, he never has a date."

"It was embarrassing. The whole thing was embarrassing. I'm glad I'll never have to lay eyes on him again."

"Oh, Julia, it can't have been that bad. I think he sounds quite taken with you."

Taken with me? Now Eleonora 's being ridiculous.

"Would you like a sandwich?"

"Please."

We talk no more of Ben Ben that evening, much to my relief. Once we've eaten,

I'm able to sit at the dining table with Eleonora and, while she works on her article, I work on

my essay on Tess of the D 'Urbervilles. Damn, but that woman was in the wrong place at

the wrong time in the wrong century. By the time I finish, it's midnight, and Eleonora has long

since gone to bed. I make my way to my room, exhausted, but pleased that I've accom-

plished so much for a Monday.

I curl up in my white iron bed, wrapping my mother's quilt around me, close my eyes,

and I'm instantly asleep. That night I dream of dark places, bleak white cold floors, and

gray eyes.

For the rest of the week, I throw myself into my studies and my job at Clayton's. Eleonora is busy too, compiling her last edition of her student magazine before she has to relinquish it to the new editor while also cramming for her finals. By Wednesday, she's much better, and I no longer have to endure the sight of her pink-flannel-with-too-many-rabbits PJs. I call my mom in Georgia to check on her, but also so she can wish me luck for my final exams. She proceeds to tell me about her latest venture into candle making - my mother is all about new business ventures. Fundamentally she's bored and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a goldfish. It'll be something new next week. She worries me. I hope she hasn't mortgaged the house to finance this latest scheme. And I hope that Bob - her relatively new but much older husband - is keeping an eye on her now that I'm no longer there. He does seem a lot more grounded than Husband Number Three.

"How are things with you, Julia?"

For a moment, I hesitate, and I have Mom's full attention.  
"I'm fine."

"Julia? Have you met someone?" Wow... how does she do that? The excitement in her voice is palpable.

"No, Mom, it's nothing. You'll be the first to know if I do."

"Julia, you really need to get out more, honey. You worry me."

"Mom, I'm fine. How's Bob?" As ever, distraction is the best policy.

Later that evening, I call Ray, my stepdad, Mom's Husband Number Two, the man I consider my father, and the man whose name I bear. It's a brief conversation. In fact, it's not so much a conversation as a one-sided series of grunts in response to my gentle coax-ing. Ray is not a talker. But he's still alive, he's still watching soccer on TV, and going bowling and fly-fishing or making furniture when he's not. Ray is a skilled carpenter and the reason I know the difference between a hawk and a handsaw. All seems well with him.

Friday night, Eleonora and I are debating what to do with our evening - we want some time out from our studies, from our work, and from student newspapers - when the doorbell rings.

Standing on our doorstep is my good friend Jose, clutching a bottle of champagne.

"Jose! Great to see you!" I give him a quick hug. "Come in."

Jose is the first person I met when I arrived at WSU, looking as lost and lonely as I did.

We recognized a kindred spirit in each of us that day, and we've been friends ever since.

Not only do we share a sense of humor, but we discovered that both Ray and Jose Senior

were in the same army unit together. As a result, our fathers have become firm friends too.

Jose is studying engineering and is the first in his family to make it to college. He's

pretty damn bright, but his real passion is photography. Jose has a great eye for a good picture.

"I have news." He grins, his dark eyes twinkling.

"Don't tell me - you've managed not to get kicked out for another week," I tease, and

he scowls playfully at me.

"The Portland Place Gallery is going to exhibit my photos next month."

"That's amazing - congratulations!" Delighted for him, I hug him again.

Eleonora beams  
at him too.

"Way to go Jose! I should put this in the paper. Nothing like last minute editorial

changes on a Friday evening." She grins.

"Let's celebrate. I want you to come to the opening." Jose looks intently at me. I flush.

"Both of you, of course," he adds, glancing nervously at Eleonora .

Jose and I are good friends, but I know deep down inside, he'd like to be more. He's cute and funny, but he's just not for me. He's more like the brother I never had. Julia often teases me that I'm missing the need-a-boyfriend gene, but the truth is - I just haven't met anyone who... well, whom I'm attracted to, even though part of me longs for those trembling knees, heart-in-my-mouth, butterflies-in-my-belly, sleepless nights.

Sometimes I wonder if there's something wrong with me. Perhaps I've spent too long in the company of my literary romantic heroes, and consequently my ideals and expectations are far too high. But in reality, nobody's ever made me feel like that.

Until very recently, the unwelcome, still small voice of my subconscious whispers.  
NO! I banish the thought immediately. I am not going there, not after that painful interview. Are you gay, Mr. Ben? I wince at the memory. I know I've dreamt about him most nights since then, but that's just to purge the awful experience from my system, surely?

I watch Jose open the bottle of champagne. He's tall, and in his jeans and t-shirt he's all shoulders and muscles, tanned skin, dark hair and burning dark eyes. Yes, Jose's pretty

hot, but I think he's finally getting the message: we're just friends. The cork makes its loud pop, and Jose looks up and smiles.

Saturday at the store is a nightmare. We are besieged by do-it-yourselfers wanting to spruce up their homes. Mr. and Mrs. Clayton, John and Patrick - the two other part-timers - and I are all rushed off our feet. But there's a lull around lunchtime, and Mrs. Clayton asks me to check on some orders while I'm sitting behind the counter at the till discreetly eating my bagel. I'm engrossed in the task, checking catalogue numbers against the items we need and the items we've ordered, eyes nicking from the order book to the computer screen and back as I check the entries match. Then, for some reason, I glance up... and find myself locked in the bold gray gaze of Ben Ben who's standing at the counter, staring at me intently. Heart failure.

"Miss Steele. What a pleasant surprise." His gaze is unwavering and intense.

Holy crap. What the hell is he doing here looking all tousled-hair and outdoorsy in his cream chunky-knit sweater, jeans, and walking boots? I think my mouth has popped open, and I can't locate my brain or my voice.

"Mr. Ben," I whisper, because that's all I can manage. There's a ghost of a smile on his lips and his eyes are alight with humor, as if he's enjoying some private joke.

"I was in the area," he says by way of explanation. "I need to stock up on a few things.

It's a pleasure to see you again, Miss Steele." His voice is warm and husky like dark melted chocolate fudge caramel . . . or something.

I shake my head to gather my wits. My heart is pounding a frantic tattoo, and for some reason I'm blushing furiously under his steady scrutiny. I am utterly thrown by the sight of him standing before me. My memories of him did not do him justice. He's not merely good-looking - he's the epitome of male beauty, breathtaking, and he's here. Here in Clayton's Hardware Store. Go figure. Finally my cognitive functions are restored and reconnected with the rest of my body.

"Julia. My name's Julia," I mutter. "What can I help you with, Mr. Ben?"

He smiles, and again it's like he's privy to some big secret. It is so disconcerting. Taking a deep breath, I put on my professional I've-worked-in-this-shop-for-years facade. / can do this.

"There are a few items I need. To start with, I'd like some cable ties," he murmurs, his

gray eyes cool but amused.

Cable ties?

"We stock various lengths. Shall I show you?" I mutter, my voice soft and wavery.

Get a grip, Steele. A slight frown mars Ben's rather lovely brow.

"Please. Lead the way, Miss Steele," he says. I try for nonchalance as I come out from behind the counter, but really I'm concentrating hard on not falling over my own feet - my legs are suddenly the consistency of Jell-O. I'm so glad I decided to wear my best jeans this morning.

"They're in with the electrical goods, aisle eight." My voice is a little too bright. I glance up at him and regret it almost immediately. Damn, he's handsome. I blush.

"After you," he murmurs, gesturing with his long-fingered, beautifully manicured

With my heart almost strangling me - because it's in my throat trying to escape from my mouth - I head down one of the aisles to the electrical section. Why is he in Portland? Why is he here at Clayton's? And from a very tiny, underused part of my brain - probably

located at the base of my medulla oblongata where my subconscious dwells - comes the thought: he's here to see you. No way! I dismiss it immediately. Why would this beautiful, powerful, urbane man want to see me? The idea is preposterous, and I kick it out of my head.

"Are you in Portland on business?" I ask, and my voice is too high, like I've got my finger trapped in a door or something. Damn! Try to be cool Julia!

"I was visiting the WSU farming division. It's based at Vancouver. I'm currently funding some research there in crop rotation and soil science," he says matter-of-factly. See? Not here to find you at all, my subconscious sneers at me, loud, proud, and pouty. I flush at my foolish wayward thoughts.

"All part of your feed-the-world plan?" I tease.

"Something like that," he acknowledges, and his lips quirk up in a half smile.

He gazes at the selection of cable ties we stock at Clayton's. What on Earth is he going to do with those? I cannot picture him as a do-it-yourselfer at all. His fingers trail across the various packages displayed, and for some inexplicable reason, I have to look away. He bends and selects a packet.

"These will do," he says with his oh-so-secret smile, and I blush.

"Is there anything else?"

"I'd like some masking tape."

Masking tape?

"Are you redecorating?" The words are out before I can stop them. Surely he hires laborers or has staff to help him decorate?

"No, not redecorating," he says quickly then smirks, and I have the uncanny feeling that he's laughing at me.

Am I that funny? Funny looking?

"This way," I murmur embarrassed. "Masking tape is in the decorating aisle."

I glance behind me as he follows.

"Have you worked here long?" His voice is low, and he's gazing at me, gray eyes concentrating hard. I blush even more brightly. Why the hell does he have this effect on me?

I feel like I'm fourteen years old - gauche, as always, and out of place. Eyes front Steele!

"Four years," I mutter as we reach our goal. To distract myself, I reach down and select

the two widths of masking tape that we stock.

"I'll take that one," Ben says softly pointing to the wider tape, which I pass to him.

Our fingers brush very briefly, and the current is there again, zapping through me like I've touched an exposed wire. I gasp involuntarily as I feel it, all the way down to somewhere dark and unexplored, deep in my belly. Desperately, I scrabble around for my equilibrium.

"Anything else?" My voice is husky and breathy. His eyes widen slightly.

"Some rope, I think." His voice mirrors mine, husky.

"This way." I duck my head down to hide my recurring blush and head for the aisle.

"What sort were you after? We have synthetic and natural filament rope... twine..."

cable cord. . ." I halt at his expression, his eyes darkening. Holy cow.

"I'll take five yards of the natural filament rope please."

Quickly, with trembling fingers, I measure out five yards against the fixed ruler, aware

that his hot gray gaze is on me. I dare not look at him. Jeez, could I feel any more self-

conscious? Taking my Stanley knife from the back pocket of my jeans, I cut it then coil it

neatly before tying it in a slipknot. By some miracle, I managed not to

remove a finger with

my knife.

"Were you a Girl Scout?" he asks, sculptured, sensual lips curled in amusement. Don't look at his mouth!

"Organized, group activities aren't really my thing, Mr. Ben."

He arches a brow.

"What is your thing, Juliastasia?" he asks, his voice soft and his secret smile is back. I gaze at him unable to express myself. I'm on shifting tectonic plates. Try and be cool, Julia, my tortured subconscious begs on bended knee.

"Books," I whisper, but inside, my subconscious is screaming: You! You are my thing!

I slap it down instantly, mortified that my psyche is having ideas above its station.

"What kind of books?" He cocks his head to one side. Why is he so interested?

"Oh, you know. The usual. The classics. British literature, mainly."

He rubs his chin with his long index finger and thumb as he contemplates my answer.

Or perhaps he's just very bored and trying to hide it.

"Anything else you need?" I have to get off this subject - those fingers on that face are so beguiling.

"I don't know. What else would you recommend?"

What would I recommend? I don't even know what you're doing.

"For a do-it-yourselfer?"

He nods, gray eyes alive with wicked humor. I flush, and my eyes stray of their own accord to his snug jeans.

"Coveralls," I reply, and I know I'm no longer screening what's coming out of my mouth.

He raises an eyebrow, amused, yet again.

"You wouldn't want to ruin your clothing," I gesture vaguely in the direction of his jeans.

"I could always take them off." He smirks.

"Um." I feel the color in my cheeks rising again. I must be the color of the communist manifesto. Stop talking. Stop talking NOW.

"I'll take some coveralls. Heaven forbid I should ruin any clothing," he says dryly.

I try and dismiss the unwelcome image of him without jeans.

"Do you need anything else?" I squeak as I hand him the blue coveralls.

He ignores my inquiry.

"How's the article coming along?"

He's finally asked me a normal question, away from all the innuendo and the confusing double talk. . . a question I can answer. I grasp it tightly with two hands as if were a life raft, and I go for honesty.

"I'm not writing it, Julia is. Miss KavJuliagh. My roommate, she's the writer. She's very happy with it. She's the editor of the magazine, and she was devastated that she couldn't do the interview in person." I feel like I've come up for air - at last, a normal topic of conversation. "Her only concern is that she doesn't have any original photographs of you."

Ben raises an eyebrow.

"What sort of photographs does she want?"

Okay. I hadn't factored in this response. I shake my head, because I just don't know.

"Well, I'm around. Tomorrow, perhaps. . ." he trails off.

"You'd be willing to attend a photo shoot?" My voice is squeaky again. Eleonora will be in seventh heaven if I can pull this off. And you might see him again tomorrow, that dark place at the base of my brain whispers seductively at me. I dismiss the thought - of all the

silly, ridiculous...

"Eleonora will be delighted - if we can find a photographer." I'm so pleased, I smile at him broadly. His lips part, like he's taking a sharp intake of breath, and he blinks. For a fraction of a second, he looks lost somehow, and the Earth shifts slightly on its axis, the tectonic plates sliding into a new position.

Oh my. Ben Ben's lost look.

"Let me know about tomorrow." Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls out his wallet. "My card. It has my cell number on it. You'll need to call before ten in the morning."

"Okay." I grin up at him. Eleonora is going to be thrilled.

"Julia!"

Paul has materialized at the other end of the aisle. He's Mr. Clayton's youngest brother. I'd heard he was home from Princeton, but I wasn't expecting to see him today.

"Er, excuse me for a moment, Mr. Ben." Ben frowns as I turn away from him.

Paul has always been a buddy, and in this strange moment that I'm having with the rich, powerful, awesomely off-the-scale attractive control-freak Ben, it's great to talk to someone who's normal. Paul hugs me hard taking me by surprise.

"Julia, hi, it's so good to see you!" he gushes.

"Hello Paul, how are you? You home for your brother's birthday?"

"Yep. You're looking well, Julia, really well." He grins as he examines me at arm's length. Then he releases me but keeps a possessive arm draped over my shoulder. I shuffle from foot to foot, embarrassed. It's good to see Paul, but he's always been over-familiar.

When I glance up at Ben Ben, he's watching us like a hawk, his gray eyes hooded and speculative, his mouth a hard impassive line. He's changed from the weirdly attentive customer to someone else - someone cold and distant.

"Paul, I'm with a customer. Someone you should meet," I say, trying to defuse the antagonism I see in Ben's eyes. I drag Paul over to meet him, and they weigh each other up. The atmosphere is suddenly arctic.

"Er, Paul, this is Ben Ben. Mr. Ben, this is Paul Clayton. His brother owns the place." And for some irrational reason, I feel I have to explain a bit more.

"I've known Paul ever since I've worked here, though we don't see each other that often. He's back from Princeton where he's studying business administration." I'm bab-

bling... Stop, now!

"Mr. Clayton." Ben holds his hand out, his look unreadable.

"Mr. Ben," Paul returns his handshake. "Wait up - not the Ben Ben? Of Ben Enterprises Holdings?" Paul goes from surly to awestruck in less than a nanosecond. Ben gives him a polite smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"Wow - is there anything I can get you?"

"Julia has it covered, Mr. Clayton. She's been very attentive." His expression is impassive, but his words... it's like he's saying something else entirely. It's baffling.

"Cool," Paul responds. "Catch you later, Julia."

"Sure, Paul." I watch him disappear toward the stock room. "Anything else, Mr. Ben?"

"Just these items." His tone is clipped and cool. Damn... have I offended him? Taking a deep breath, I turn and head for the till. What is his problem?

I ring up the rope, coveralls, masking tape, and cable ties at the till.

"That will be forty-three dollars, please." I glance up at Ben, and I wish I hadn't. He's watching me closely, his gray eyes intense and smoky. It's unnerving.

"Would you like a bag?" I ask as I take his credit card.

"Please, Juliastasia." His tongue caresses my name, and my heart once again is frantic.

I can hardly breathe. Hurriedly, I place his purchases in a plastic carrier.

"You'll call me if you want me to do the photo shoot?" He's all business once more. I

nod, rendered speechless yet again, and hand back his credit card.

"Good. Until tomorrow perhaps." He turns to leave, then pauses. "Oh - and Juliastasia,

I'm glad Miss KavJuliagh couldn't do the interview." He smiles, then strides with renewed

purpose out of the store, slinging the plastic bag over his shoulder, leaving me a quiver-

ing mass of raging female hormones. I spend several minutes staring at the closed door

through which he's just left before I return to planet Earth.

Okay - I like him. There, I've admitted it to myself. I cannot hide from my feelings

anymore. I've never felt like this before. I find him attractive, very attractive. But it's a

lost cause, I know, and I sigh with bittersweet regret. It was just a coincidence, his coming

here. But still, I can admire him from afar, surely? No harm can come of that. And if I find

a photographer, I can do some serious admiring tomorrow. I bite my lip in anticipation and

find myself grinning like a schoolgirl. I need to phone Eleonora and organize a photo-shoot.

